Security Council

Sixty-seventh year

Provisional

6706th meeting

Tuesday, 24 January 2012, 3 p.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Ebrahim	(South Africa)
Members:	Azerbaijan	Mr. Sharifov
	China	Mr. Zhang Changwei
	Colombia	Mrs. Escorcia
	France	Ms. Legendre
	Germany	Mr. Eick
	Guatemala	Mr. Briz Gutiérrez
	India	Mr. Kumar
	Morocco	Mr. Erroja
	Pakistan	Mr. Tarar
	Portugal	Mr. Vaz Patto
	Russian Federation	Mr. Demin
	Togo	Mr. Mbeou
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Day
	United States of America	Ms. Finerty

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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The meeting resumed at 3.10 p.m.

The President: Under rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure I invite the representatives of Bahrain, Benin and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to participate in this meeting.

I wish once again to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than four minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously.

I now give the floor to the representative of Malaysia.

Mr. Haniff (Malaysia): Allow me first to congratulate you, Sir, on your presidency of the Council and to thank you for having convened this open debate on the situation in the Middle East. Secondly, my delegation wishes to align itself with the statement made by the representative of Egypt on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and with the statement to be delivered by the representative of Kazakhstan on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

It is with deep concern and growing frustration that we continue to endlessly address the situation in the Middle East, particularly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. As we begin a new year, we neither do so in the expectation that we will make tangible progress in the peace process, nor do we anticipate that we will even take a step closer to our noble goal of achieving a solution. On the contrary, we begin this new year with a sense of pessimism that my delegation believes is certainly well founded and based on troubling developments on the ground.

Regrettably, Israel continues its expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, against all norms of international law and despite the condemnation of their illegal acts by the international community. With the number of housing units being built in the West Bank having grown to 1,850 in 2011, the expansion of illegal settlements since 2002 is taking place on an unprecedented scale. In East Jerusalem alone, the eventual construction of thousands of apartment units will almost certainly change the geopolitical realities on the ground.

In a report recently published by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, since 1967 Israel has established about 150 settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. In addition to the unabated expansion of settlements, Palestinian structures and residences in both the West Bank and East Jerusalem are being demolished. It has been found that over 60 per cent of Palestinian structures demolished in 2011 were in areas allocated to settlements. Furthermore, a greater expansion of settlements has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in settler violence against Palestinians and their property, which has become more systemic rather than a rarity.

The result of these activities is the continued suffering of the Palestinian people. While morally wrong, the settlements are also illegal under international law as they violate article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and run contrary to Israel's obligations. In this connection, Malaysia supports the action taken by NAM to request Switzerland, in its capacity as depositary of the Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, to reconvene at the earliest opportunity a conference of the high contracting parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention for the purpose of upholding the obligations and responsibilities incumbent upon the high contracting parties in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. This is in accordance with recommendations contained in General Assembly resolutions 64/10 and 64/254.

Thus far, the calls of the international community, including the United Nations, to stop these illegal activities continue to fall on deaf ears as Israel stays on its hastened path down the wrong side of history. This it does unapologetically and without an ounce of remorse, which begs the question: Does Israel have any obligations at all to begin with?

At this juncture, it goes without saying that Israel would need to halt illegal settlement activities that have resulted in great injustice to the Palestinian people. Illegal settlement activities have also time and again stalled peace talks. All sides must realize that, in order to achieve peace in Palestine and the Middle East, negotiations would need to begin in a spirit of sincerity, goodwill and trust. Obviously, this is not easy to accomplish, but, for a start, all parties should refrain from engaging in provocative actions that would certainly do more harm than good.

As the deadline set by the Quartet to come forward with comprehensive proposals on territory and security is upon us, Malaysia feels that the Security

Council, serving as the custodian of international peace and security, must do its part to ensure that conditions are ripe for all parties to resume negotiations on finding a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Malaysia is of the opinion that, if a fair and peaceful solution to the conflict is to be achieved, the onus to compromise and make way for negotiations does not fall on Palestine alone. Israel's insistence that Palestine assume direct negotiations without any preconditions does not reflect Israel's willingness to be fair and to be more accommodating to its future neighbour.

While my delegation speaks today with a sense of pessimism, make no mistake that we remain resolute in our commitment to finding a lasting two-State solution based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, where both sides could live side by side in peace and taking into account the security concerns of both. It is our earnest desire to see future discussions on the issue take a different tone that is more positive and reflects substantial progress on the ground. The time for peace is now and we must not miss this opportunity. Prolonging the conflict will only create more problems and is not in anyone's interest.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Australia.

Ms. King (Australia): Allow me to congratulate you, Sir, on your country's presidency of the Council this month, and to thank you for having convened this important debate at a critical time for the region. I should also like to thank Assistant Secretary-General Fernandez-Taranco for his briefing this morning.

One year on from the dramatic events in Tunisia, then Egypt, Libya and other countries in the Middle East, the outlook for the region is one both of encouraging progress and of situations of continuing concern. Australia will continue to actively support the historic process of democratic transition under way in the Middle East and North Africa. Elections are an important step in this process, including in Egypt, where strong participation rates in the country's first elections in November last year underscored the will of the people to act on their legitimate aspirations to freedom and democracy.

During this period of profound political change in the Middle East, it is imperative for the future stability of the region that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict be resolved. The rapidly changing geopolitics of the region present a new opportunity for reaching an enduring peace agreement. However, if this opportunity is not seized and positive steps towards a conclusion of the peace process are not made soon, the prospects for a lasting settlement will become increasingly remote.

Australia has consistently supported a negotiated two-State solution that allows a secure Israel to live side by side with a secure and independent Palestinian State. As a friend of Israel, we recognize Israel's legitimate security concerns, and as a friend of the Palestinian people we support the realization of their right to self-determination through their own State.

We commend the ongoing efforts of the Quartet to promote a resumption of direct negotiations. We also commend and have been encouraged by the efforts of Jordan, under the leadership of His Majesty King Abdullah, to bring the two parties together for the first time since late 2010. We also greatly welcome the recent activity of the Secretary-General in support of the peace process, including during his recent visit to Lebanon and through his forthcoming visit elsewhere in region, which are occurring at a critical juncture and provide all parties with an opportunity to advance the cause of peace.

We urge both sides to build on these initiatives and move forward to substantive negotiations urgently and without delay. To achieve this, both sides must demonstrate that they are serious about resuming negotiations in accordance with the Quartet's statement of 23 September 2011, including by refraining from provocative actions that undermine the prospects for achieving a two-State solution. This includes the expansion of Israeli settlements and outposts in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which the Australian Government has called on Israel to end. Violence of any kind targeting civilians must also cease. And, while we recognize Israel's legitimate security concerns, more must be done to ease the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

We applaud the efforts of the Palestinian leadership in building the necessary economic and institutional base for statehood. Australia's five-year funding plan of over $300 million is evidence of our strong support for this endeavour. Now it is clear that this institution-building must be matched by political progress towards peace on both sides.

We continue to support the work of the League of Arab States in assisting positive transformation in the

Arab world. This includes its efforts to end the bloodshed in Syria. The continuing violence in Syria is appalling; since the violence began in March last year, the death toll has surpassed 5,000 according to estimates of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. We urge the Syrian regime to stop its brutality and to implement credible political reforms, including genuine dialogue with opposition groups, in accordance with the Arab League plan of action. And we urge members of the Security Council to discharge their responsibility to deal with the violence in Syria promptly and expeditiously.

To conclude, the Middle East remains a region confronted by both challenges and opportunities. We have common interests in securing durable peace and stability and in satisfying the legitimate aspirations of the people of the region for practical reform and economic opportunity. It is imperative that the Council, regional actors and other engaged members of the international community take urgent, positive steps towards realizing these goals.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Japan.

Mr. Nishida (Japan): I thank you, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to address the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East.

Japan fully understands the earnest aspiration of Palestinians to build their own State and strongly supports a two-State solution, under which Israel and a future independent Palestinian State would live side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition. Japan supports the vision that the borders under a two-State solution should be defined through negotiations, based on the 1967 lines and with mutually agreed swaps, in a way that would achieve the peaceful coexistence of a viable Palestinian State and Israel, with secure and recognized borders. Such a two-State solution can be achieved only through sincere negotiations between the parties concerned. Japan firmly believes that both sides should do their utmost to conduct direct negotiations in line with the time frame set out by the Quartet. In that connection, Japan welcomes the meetings between Israel and the Palestinians held in Amman this month, and expresses its deepest respect for the efforts of Jordan and the Quartet in preparing for the meetings. Japan strongly expects that those meetings will lead to the early resumption of direct negotiations.

Japan does not recognize any measures that prejudge the outcome of final status negotiations, and calls upon both sides to refrain from any provocative actions in order to build mutual trust. Both parties must abide by their obligations under previous agreements.

Japan reiterates its strong call to Israel to immediately freeze its settlement activities in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, which violate international law. At the same time, we call upon the Palestinian Authority to continue its efforts to improve security and fulfil its commitments to cease violence and work against incitement.

Japan has been supporting the efforts of the Palestinian Authority to establish statehood and is committed to continuously providing assistance in that regard. Japan is also keenly following Palestinian efforts to establish a unified Government.

Japan shares the serious concerns of the international community over the situation in Syria. Japan supports the initiative of the League of Arab States to bring about stability in Syria, and also hopes that the Security Council will act effectively. We deplore the continuing wide-scale use of force by the Syrian authorities in spite of the League's deployment of the monitoring mission. We deem it important that the United Nations provide technical assistance to observers participating in the mission. Japan condemns the use of force by the Syrian authorities against civilians and reiterates its call to them to immediately halt such acts of violence, promptly carry out reforms and engage in dialogue with the Syrian people.

Tomorrow, Egypt will celebrate the first anniversary of its historic change. Japan welcomes the fact that the elections for the People's Assembly were conducted without any major disorder. We are also pleased that Japan assisted in the conduct of elections by providing funding and sharing expertise. As the stability of Egypt is a linchpin for maintaining that of the entire region, Japan hopes that the political process will evolve in a peaceful manner and that economic and social reforms will lead to tangible results at an early stage.

The President: I now give the floor to Mr. Thomas Mayr-Harting, Head of the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations.

Mr. Mayr-Harting: Thank you, Mr. President, for giving the floor to the European Union.

The acceding country Croatia, the candidate country Montenegro, the country of the Stabilization and Association Process and potential candidate Albania, as well as the Republic of Moldova, align themselves with this declaration.

Over the past few years, in these tri-monthly open debates of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, we have very often heard that the peace process was at a critical juncture and that decisive progress was needed now in order to finally turn the legitimate aspirations of the peoples of the region for peace, security and statehood into a reality. At the start of this new year, such calls from the international community are needed once again, now more than ever, to help both sides to this conflict to settle their differences and agree on the terms of a comprehensive solution.

The European Union welcomes and supports the efforts by Jordan to facilitate direct talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians as part of the Quartet process. The European Union calls on both parties to come forward with comprehensive proposals on borders and security, as envisaged in the Quartet statement of 23 September 2011 (see SG/2178). A bold and decisive demonstration of political leadership is needed from both sides to maintain the momentum of the talks. As have others during this meeting, the European Union wishes to stress once again the central role of the Quartet in that context and express its full support for the ongoing Quartet process aimed at achieving an agreement between the parties by the end of 2012.

The Quartet statement issued on 23 September 2011 called on both parties to make substantial progress within six months and to reach an agreement by the end of 2012. In that vein, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Baroness Catherine Ashton, hosted a meeting of Quartet envoys in Brussels on 9 October 2011 to launch the process. The Quartet envoys subsequently met the parties separately on 26 October, 14 November and 14 December 2011 in Jerusalem. Jordan then took the initiative to invite the Quartet and the parties to a joint meeting on 3 January. That meeting was a positive step, since it was the first one in the current context during which the parties met face to face. At that meeting, the parties agreed to further bilateral preparatory meetings under Jordanian auspices.

The European Union reaffirms its commitment to a two-State solution. The legitimacy of the State of Israel and the right of Palestinians to achieve statehood must never be called into question. The European Union reaffirms its clear positions on negotiations, with regard to parameters, principles and issues, including the conclusions of the European Union Foreign Affairs Council in December 2009, December 2010 and May, July and October 2011, as well as the conclusions adopted yesterday and the statement delivered on behalf of the European Union at the Security Council on 21 April 2011 (see S/PV.6520). The European Union also reiterates its support for the Arab Peace Initiative. On its tenth anniversary, the Initiative deserves renewed attention.

The European Union underlines the urgency of finding a negotiated solution and urges the parties to refrain from actions that undermine the prospects for peace. The European Union calls on the parties to demonstrate their commitment to a peaceful solution and to the Quartet process by taking actions that can build confidence and create the environment of trust necessary to ensure meaningful negotiations leading to a comprehensive and lasting peace.

Developments on the ground play a crucial part in creating the context for successful negotiations. The European Union reiterates that settlements, the separation barrier, where built on occupied land, the demolition of homes and evictions are illegal under international law, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two-State solution impossible. The European Union urges the Government of Israel to immediately end all settlement activity in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, including natural growth, and to dismantle all outposts erected since March 2001.

The European Union remains one of the major supporters of, and contributors to, the Palestinian institution- and State-building efforts led by President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad. The European Union remains dedicated to continuing its support to the Palestinian Authority's successful State-building efforts, which have been acknowledged as a remarkable success.

The continuing financial difficulties of the Palestinian Authority risk jeopardizing the achievements made so far in institution-building. The European Union therefore underlines the necessity of

providing predictable and further support to the Palestinian Authority and calls for equitable burden-sharing by the international donor community. The European Union has consistently called for intra-Palestinian reconciliation behind President Mahmoud Abbas as an important element for the unity of a future Palestinian State and for reaching a two-State solution.

As regards Gaza in particular, the European Union calls for the full implementation of resolution 1860 (2009), for the full respect of international humanitarian law and for an immediate, sustained and unconditional opening of crossings for the flow of humanitarian aid, commercial goods and persons to and from Gaza, including goods from the West Bank. In this context, the European Union expresses its concerns about the dismantling of the Karni crossing and repeats its calls for the full implementation of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access.

The European Union welcomed as a step forward the measures announced by the Israeli Government. However, more is needed. The European Union calls for full implementation and complementary measures in order to achieve a fundamental change of policy that allows for the reconstruction and economic recovery of Gaza, including through exports. The European Union has offered its assistance in achieving that objective. The European Union calls for a solution addressing Israel's legitimate security concerns. The EU wholeheartedly condemns any actions in which civilians are hurt or killed.

In conclusion, regarding Syria, the European Union remains deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation in the country and the widespread and systematic violations of human rights perpetrated by the Syrian authorities against their people, which may amount to crimes against humanity. The European Union calls for an immediate end to the violence, is particularly concerned by the recent escalation of violence, and reiterates its condemnation in the strongest terms of the brutal crackdown by the Syrian Government, which risks exacerbating still further the spiral of violence, sectarian clashes and militarization. President Al-Assad must step aside immediately to allow for a peaceful and democratic transition.

The European Union recalls its support to the League of Arab States' efforts to end the cycle of violence in Syria and to the deployment of its monitoring mission. The EU welcomes the decision of the United Nations to provide assistance to the League of Arab States observer missions. It condemns the attacks on the League of Arab States missions monitors. The Syrian authorities have a responsibility to protect the observers in their country. The European Union is deeply concerned by the Syrian authorities' lack of cooperation and urges them to fully comply with their commitments under the League of Arab States action plan to completely stop acts of violence against civilians, free political detainees, remove troops, tanks and weapons from cities, and allow independent observers and the media to travel in and report on Syria.

The European Union urges all members of the Security Council to uphold their responsibilities to end the violence against the Syrian population and support the Syrian people in their legitimate desire for freedom and political rights. In this regard, the European Union will continue to engage with representative members of the Syrian opposition, such as the Syrian National Council, which adhere to non-violence, inclusiveness and democratic values.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Turkey.

Mr. Müftüoğlu (Turkey): We listened to the briefing by Assistant Secretary-General Oscar Fernandez-Taranco with great interest. The Middle East has always been a conflict-prone area throughout its history. The region is undergoing a structural reformulation. The issue is by no means confined to the region; there are repercussions on a wider scale. It is time that we, the nations of the world, assume our individual and collective roles to effectively address the challenges ahead.

Last week, the Security Council was briefed on the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. That briefing can be interpreted as another call on the international community to immediately address the Arab-Israeli conflict. The illegal blockade of Gaza is still in force. Our memories of Israel's deadly military operation against a civilian humanitarian aid campaign on the high seas are still fresh. We sadly note the increase in settlement activities and settler violence against Palestinians. Those remain a major obstacle to the resumption of direct negotiations between the parties. Furthermore,

they seriously endanger the vision of a two-State solution.

We therefore call on the Israeli Government to abide by international law and fulfil its responsibilities to the international community. In any case, resort to violence by any party cannot be tolerated as a means to resolve existing disputes. The cornerstone of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East is the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Palestinian people must as soon as possible be able to fully exercise their inalienable rights in accordance with numerous United Nations resolutions, the Madrid principles, the road map and the Arab Peace Initiative. An independent Palestine should be recognized, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side by side with Israel in peace.

Last fall, we welcomed the membership of Palestine in UNESCO. We also wholeheartedly support the Palestinian application for United Nations membership, submitted by President Abbas on 23 September 2011. The international community should encourage the struggle for the long-overdue and well-deserved right to statehood of the Palestinian people.

We welcome the recent meetings between Palestinian and Israeli representatives in Amman. We call on both parties to conduct the meetings in good faith, aiming for concrete advances towards a just and comprehensive settlement. In the meantime, steps towards national reconciliation in Palestine are of vital importance. We praise the efforts of President Abbas and the Palestinian representatives in that regard. We call on all members of the international community to support the process without prejudice.

The Palestinian people will prove that, given viable circumstances, they are capable of performing as a promising political and economic entity in the region. We therefore call on the international community to strengthen its support for the development, reconstruction and humanitarian projects in Palestine. The emergency appeal last week by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East for funding for that noble cause rightfully deserves our attention.

We wish to highlight yet again that the times ahead will require us to be even more vigilant. The Middle East is going through a transition that will have inevitable repercussions on a wider scale. We should identify the challenges accurately and set our priorities correctly. We cannot and should not let the prolonged dispute divert the path of people in search of a bright and secure future. The Israeli-Palestinian question is very critical to that path.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Abdou Salam Diallo, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

Mr. Diallo (*spoke in French*): On behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I should like to warmly congratulate you, Sir, on your assumption of the presidency of the Council for the month of January and to wish you every success in your endeavours. I am deeply indebted to you and to your colleagues on the Council for giving our Committee the opportunity to address the Council in today's deliberations, which again raise the alarm regarding increased Israeli settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem.

Our Committee reiterates its concern at the Israeli Government's headlong pursuit of this illegal policy, which deliberately undermines the Promethean vision of two States, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security within secure and internationally recognized borders. The settlements, which have been sheltered for too long behind a culture of impunity, are violating the laws of occupation, the resolutions of the Security Council and the road map. In practice, they preclude the two-State solution and pose a threat to international peace and security.

To date, the Council has failed to fully assume its responsibility and to take the necessary decisions — unlike most of its members and those of the regional groups, which last month strongly condemned the Jewish settlement activity. The Committee shares their feelings of exasperation and urges the Security Council to take strong measures to safeguard the two-State solution before it is too late, in order to limit, if not to avert, the unforeseeable consequences of a terrible tragedy that has nonetheless been predicted.

The Council must realize that its credibility is at stake, since, when the legal avenues for a resolution of such an untenable situation are barred, peace and security are everywhere imperilled. Under the present circumstances, the signatories to the Fourth Geneva Convention must take a firm stance and convene the

conference of the high-contracting parties, as should have been done long ago. That means that the only possible lasting solution is one that would result from the full application of international law, including the relevant Security Council resolutions.

In that spirit, it should be noted, neither with displeasure nor with wide-eyed optimism, that there has been some movement towards peace, although tentative as yet, based on the recent preliminary meetings between the Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Amman, under Jordanian auspices. We cherish the hope that they will pave the way for credible peace negotiations focusing on the two-State solution and based on the 1967 borders.

It is therefore important that the Quartet and its regional partners remain firmly committed by inviting the parties, including first and foremost Israel, to meet the existing commitments. We solemnly call on the stakeholders to make a salutary return to the negotiating table on the basis of clear criteria guaranteed by the Quartet. In that regard, we have not forgotten that such a resumption of negotiations should be supported by confidence-building measures on the ground, including an end to acts of violence, the lifting of the blockade on Gaza, the removal of the checkpoints and the release of Palestinian prisoners.

As the 26 January deadline set by the Quartet approaches, we note that the Palestinian party has submitted detailed border and security proposals. We hope that Israel will do the same in order to demonstrate an equal commitment to a resolution of the conflict.

The Committee remains concerned by the current impasse in the Security Council with regard to Palestine's application for membership in the United Nations. We call on the Council and the General Assembly to fulfil their responsibilities in that regard, and reiterate the appeal for countries that have not yet recognized the State of Palestine to do so. The Committee also takes this opportunity to welcome the recent progress in the Palestinian reconciliation process centred on the Palestine Liberation Organization platform.

In conclusion, we urge the Council to take decisive action to bring an end to the settlement activity and commence their dismantlement, while the two-State solution is still possible. For its part, the Committee will continue to contribute constructively to the achievement of that goal, which requires only that the commitments made be translated into clear and unequivocal action.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Indonesia.

Mr. Percaya (Indonesia): As this is my first appearance before the Council in my capacity as the new Indonesian Permanent Representative, I would like to congratulate South Africa on its presidency for the month of January and to wish the members of the Council, especially those that have joined this month as elected members, every success in their endeavours. I would also like to extend my sincere appreciation to the members of the Security Council for convening this open debate on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. My deep appreciation also goes to Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Oscar Fernandez-Taranco for his briefing on such an important issue.

My delegation associates itself with the statements delivered by the Permanent Representatives of Kazakhstan and Egypt on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement, respectively.

The issue of Palestine is very dear to the people and Government of Indonesia. We are deeply concerned about the absence of progress in the peace process between Israel and Palestine. The 26 January deadline established by the Quartet for both parties to resume direct negotiations will arrive this week, with that goal nowhere in sight. Israel's continued illegal settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, is not only a grave violation of international law, but also a stumbling block in that respect. The January report of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on the humanitarian impact of Israeli settlement policies succinctly demonstrates the grave danger that the settlement question poses, not just to the prospect of peace in the Middle East but even for progress towards the resumption of negotiations.

Continuing settlement construction, expansion and encroachment on Palestinian land is an integral part of the ongoing fragmentation of the West Bank, including the isolation of East Jerusalem. As we know, Israel has also continued its illegal construction of the separation wall in the West Bank, including in and

around occupied East Jerusalem, in defiance of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that Israel maintains the same kind of control in the Gaza Strip, where its blockade continues to hinder the movement of people and goods. The blockade is responsible not only for the terrible humanitarian situation there, but also for even deeper unemployment and a shrinking of private sector businesses, as many of them continue to shut down.

Despite all of that, indeed because of it, my delegation is still hopeful about the resumption of negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians under the guidelines outlined by the Quartet in its statement of 23 September (see SG/2178). Indonesia therefore calls upon the Quartet and the parties to ensure that everything is done to minimize every delay and eliminate every hurdle.

We urge Israel to demonstrate good faith by not placing insurmountable obstacles, such as we now have in its settlement policy, on the path of peace. A resolution of the conflict will not be easy, and nobody should expect it to be. The core final status issues — borders, water, security, refugees, settlements and Jerusalem — pose considerable challenges, but they are not insurmountable.

It remains our view that the road to peace lies in confronting the issues, not in avoiding or complicating them. To that end, true leadership and courage are required.

Indonesia reiterates its support for the two-State solution, namely, Israel and a viable and independent Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side by side in peace and security on the basis of the principle of land for peace and a just and comprehensive regional peace consistent with Security Council resolutions, the road map of the Quartet and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Let me also stress that a truly comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East also demands a viable resolution of the Israel-Lebanon and Israel-Syria tracks. Israel therefore has to withdraw completely from the remaining Lebanese occupied land, as well as from the occupied Syrian Golan.

Finally, Indonesia wishes to reiterate its support for Palestine's application for membership in the United Nations, which was submitted on 23 September 2011.

Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al-Hussein (Jordan): In the debate held in the Security Council under this item last year, my delegation described in some detail the law applicable to the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, as confirmed previously by the decisions of the Council and by the 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

We wish to summarize our principal point briefly again today: the applicable law in respect of the exercise by Israel of military control over the occupied Palestinian territories is not Israeli law, nor whatever domestic law Israel sees fit to impose there, but international humanitarian law applicable to all high contracting parties, as well as obligations that are erga omnes. Israel's administrative and military regulations, insofar as the West Bank is concerned, can be lawful only if they are utterly consistent with the Fourth Geneva Convention and its control guided strictly by its obligations as the occupying Power.

The position of the International Court of Justice on this very last point is unambiguous. It maintained, in paragraph 78 of its 2004 opinion on the *Legal Consequences of the construction of a wall in the occupied Palestinian territory*, that:

> "The territories situated between the Green Line ... and the former eastern boundary of Palestine under the Mandate were occupied by Israel in 1967 during the armed conflict between Israel and Jordan. Under customary international law, these were therefore occupied territories in which Israel had the status of occupying Power. Subsequent events in these territories ... have done nothing to alter this situation. All these territories (including East Jerusalem) remain occupied territories and Israel has continued to have the status of occupying Power." (*see A/ES-10/273*)

It is also merits noting that there are no territorial exceptions to that finding: all the territory of the West Bank, as described by the Court, is considered "occupied". A closer reading of Security Council resolution 242 (1967) also bears this point out, as we explained before the International Court of Justice on 24 February 2004. In his oral submission, the late Sir Arthur Watts, Q.C, Counsel for Jordan, noted how resolution 242 (1967)

> "affirmed, unanimously, the principle of Israel': withdrawal of its armed forces 'from territories occupied in the recent conflict' — and that meant, and could only mean, territories on the non-Israeli side of the Green Line. Thus the Green Line is the starting line from which is measured the extent of Israel's occupation of non-Israeli territory; originating in 1949 as an armistice line, it became in 1967 the line to the Israeli side of which Israel had to withdraw its forces, and on the non-Israeli side of which territory was 'occupied' by Israel." *(International Court of Justice document CR 2004/3)*

It is also perhaps worth our recalling how, in negotiating the draft for what became resolution 242 (1967), the understanding reached between the principal interlocutors was for a withdrawal from all non-Israeli territory, with only minor reciprocal border rectifications.

For decades Israel has been settling on territory which does not belong to it, against the wishes of the Palestinian people, to whom the territory does belong and for whom freedom from military occupation is long overdue. Is it right that their suffering — as highlighted again in the most recent report of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs focusing on the humanitarian impact of the settlements policy — draws from us, the international community, year after year, only the thinnest response, best encapsulated by the word "noted"?

It is deeply regrettable how in recent years the Security Council has proved itself unable to adopt a position on the issue of settlements. The transfer by the occupying Power of parts of its own population into the territory it occupies represents a clear and continuing serious violation of the laws and customs applicable in international armed conflict as codified by article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and which is defined as a criminal act in article 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute.

After all, the Council is obliged, under the terms of Articles 24, paragraph 2, and Article 1, paragraph 1, of the United Nations Charter — articles which necessarily go together — to act in accordance with the purposes of the Charter, and one of those purposes is "the principles of justice and international law".

How can the exercise of the veto by a permanent member on the basis of Article 27, paragraph 3, of the Charter, in respect of the Israeli settlements being built in the occupied Palestinian territories, fit in with the two other Articles of the Charter I just mentioned: Article 24, paragraph 2, and Article 1, paragraph 1? Are we comfortable with the fact that some of the permanent members can, by their actions, make the Council seemingly bypass the principles of justice and international law? The argument is, of course, applicable not just to transfer and settlement-building, but also to other serious violations of international law and international criminal law, and not just restricted to the consideration of Israeli conduct, but also to the conduct of others in our immediate neighbourhood within the Middle East. Can the veto be used or threatened like this, so unrestrictedly, when the violations are so serious? And why should, in any case, Article 27, paragraph 3, eclipse in importance Article 24, paragraph 2, and Article 1, paragraph 1?

All of this is lamentable, I am afraid. It is small wonder that, when I served with the United Nations in the Balkans in the early 1990s, the Council and its actions seemed on many occasions to us to be so distant from the bloody events unfolding before us there.

The actions of the Israeli settler movement in the occupied Palestinian territories must, for obvious reasons, now stop, and the deep suffering of the Palestinian people must be brought to an end through the establishment of their own State on the basis of the 4 June 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living side by side with Israel in peace and security.

The Israelis will on occasion say to us that resolving the conflict is less a matter of law than of psychology, and, given the rhythms and the very real, catastrophic traumas of Jewish historical experience, they are cautious about placing their trust in anybody, let alone, they say, in us, the Arabs. And perhaps, we must concede, we could have done more to better understand that point, done more to develop greater trust by, inter alia, better explaining the terms of the Arab Peace Initiative to the Israeli public. On the other hand, the actions of States must also be guided by customary international law, which the Council itself must uphold and not undermine. Moreover, our deep opposition to the policy of settlement-building and our repeated condemnation of it, which we reiterate today, is not founded on some form of genetically based enmity or bigotry towards the Jewish people, and any

assertion of that is thoroughly distasteful to us, for it is simply not true.

What it is built on is a continuing, three-decade-long violation of international humanitarian law, confirmed by the International Court of Justice in its advisory opinion of 2004 and understood as such by the vast majority of States existing in the world today.

Finally, the exploratory talks currently under way in Jordan are not inconsistent with the law; far from it. The key, as most of us know, to the resolution of the settlements issue politically relies on the formulation of an early agreement on the border rectifications, on the basis of the interpretation just mentioned in my statement. We hope that there will be a positive outcome in this regard soon, opening the way for the much-needed final status negotiations, which will ultimately lead to freedom, security and peace.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Bangladesh.

Mr. Momen (Bangladesh): I begin by thanking your country, South Africa, and you personally, Mr. President, for steering this important open debate on the situation in the Middle East. I convey our appreciation to Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Mr. Oscar Fernandez-Taranco for his briefing this morning. We are also grateful to His Excellency Mr. Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation of South Africa, for his presence in chairing the meeting and delivering a statement.

The Bangladesh delegation aligns itself with the statements of the representatives of Egypt and Kazakhstan on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation, respectively. In addition, I wish to briefly make certain points that Bangladesh believes to be of importance.

May I congratulate Palestine on becoming a member of UNESCO — the first United Nations agency to admit it as a full member, in December 2011. States members of UNESCO deserve credit for adopting that resolution.

My delegation commends the recent meeting for negotiations between Palestine and Israel brokered by Jordan. We appreciate the efforts of King Abdullah II of Jordan and the country's Foreign Minister, Mr. Nasser Judeh, in facilitating that meeting.

We reiterate our concern over the impact of Israel's continued settlement activity in the West Bank and its adverse effects on economic development and Palestinians' access to basic services. The ongoing blockade of Gaza and the impact that the closure has had on economic development and on the plight of those living in the area is also worrying.

We are concerned about the destruction by the occupying Power of properties, homes and economic institutions and the construction of the wall in the occupied Palestinian territory, including in and around East Jerusalem, contrary to international law. Those actions have hampered the already critical socio-economic situation faced by the Palestinian population. We also express our concern about the inhuman treatment of Palestinian prisoners languishing in Israeli jails.

We also condemn the detention of the Palestinian Legislative Council Speaker, Mr. Aziz Dweik. We expect the occupying forces to release him immediately as his imprisonment is a violation of international law and human rights principles. Moreover, his detention does not help to create an environment conducive to a dialogue for a two-State solution. We are saddened and puzzled and find difficulty in understanding that the Jewish people, who suffered discrimination and ill-treatment, are now perpetrating inhuman ill-treatment towards the Palestinians.

My delegation believes that the Fourth Geneva Convention; the relevant United Nations resolutions, particularly Security Council resolutions 242 (1968), 338 (1973) and 425 (1978); the principle of land for peace; the Madrid terms of reference, which guarantee Israel's withdrawal from all occupied Arab and Palestinian territories back to the 4 June 1967 line; the road map and the Arab Peace Initiative are the best guides for achieving a two-State solution.

The principled support of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination from all corners of the globe, both bilaterally and multilaterally, has been an essential pillar of Palestinian resilience over the decades. It is heartening to note at least 131 countries have recognized the State of Palestine on the basis of the 1967 borders. It would therefore be morally befitting for this body to unanimously respect the will of the majority of Member States and to endorse the application of Palestine.

With regard to the situation in Lebanon and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, my delegation calls upon the concerned parties to fully respect Lebanon's sovereignty and stop the recurrence of breaches of resolution 1701 (2006). We further urge the occupying State to immediately halt its actions to alter the legal, physical and demographic status of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, in accordance with resolution 497 (1981).

In conclusion, let me reiterate Bangladesh's long-standing position that the continued illegal occupation of Palestine over the past six decades is the root cause of violence, unrest and destabilization in the region. Let us remind stakeholders that neither occupation nor the destruction of Palestinian houses and olive trees can help to achieve peace for the people of Israel. The principle of live-and-let-live in harmony within the legal, not the occupied jurisdiction, will lead to peace and security for the States of Israel and Palestine.

Let me also reiterate our full support for a lasting peace for all inhabitants of the region — both Arabs and Israelis — and our strong commitment to the realization of an independent, sovereign and viable State of Palestine, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, living side by side and in peace with all its neighbours.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mr. Khazaee (Islamic Republic of Iran): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for arranging this open debate on the situation on the Middle East and Palestine. We have started a new year, while popular uprisings and the aspiration of the people in the Middle East to democracy, the rule of law, independence and rejection of foreign domination, as well as their devotion to Islamic values, bear fruit.

One of the prime objectives of our foreign policy is to strengthen the trust between the Islamic Republic of Iran and our neighbours and the countries in the region through active engagement, interaction and partnership. The countries of the Middle East share a common interest in the region's security and long-term stability, and each should play its role in promoting regional socio-economic development. Obviously, a stable, economically flourishing and prosperous Middle East would create an ideal situation for each and every country in the region to move forward on the path of development and economic growth. Our continued commitment towards brotherly relations with our neighbours and regional partners in the areas of security and economic development is therefore a goal seriously pursued by my Government.

Mischievous attempts are being made to sow discord and create divisions among the nations in the Middle East region. They have tried to divide peoples by fomenting sectarian, ethnical and religious differences. The fact is that the nations of the region, with their various ethnic and religious diversities, have lived together in harmony and coexistence for centuries.

We condemn the continuation of the Israeli blockade imposed on Gaza by land, sea and air. We believe that it is an aggressive and savage action that breaches all international laws and norms, constitutes a crime against humanity and poses a serious threat to international peace and security, as well as regional stability. The blockade also constitutes a collective punishment that is unconditionally prohibited by the Fourth Geneva Convention, which deals with the rights and obligations of belligerent States.

The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that the settlement of the Palestinian crisis would be achievable only if the inalienable rights of the people of occupied Palestine are fully recognized, restored and maintained. Regrettably, due to the lack of attention to the root causes of the crisis, the Middle East conflict has remained unsolved for more than six decades. There have been numerous reasons for such failure, which include the continued occupation of the Palestinian and other Arab occupied territories by the Israeli regime, as well as its persistent violations of the rights of the Palestinian people, including the right to self-determination and, especially, the legitimate and inalienable right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland.

We believe that the only solution to the Palestinian issue and the establishment of peace is the restoration of the sovereignty right to Palestine and putting an end to occupation. The Palestinian people should be allowed to express their opinions freely regarding their own fate and future and the kind of State and Government they want to have through a referendum with the participation of all Palestinian people.

There are disturbing reports on the worsening situation of Palestinian political prisoners and

detainees illegally imprisoned and detained by the Israeli regime, in violation of international law, including international humanitarian law. Last week, a number of elected officials were arrested and detained by the Israeli regime, including Aziz Dweik, Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council. The Council should condemn this new wave in the detention campaign against the members of the Legislative Council and demand that the Israeli regime immediately release all lawmakers who continue to be imprisoned or arbitrarily detained.

The Israeli regime has continued its violations of the land, sea and air space of Lebanon and refuses to withdraw from the villages it occupies in Lebanon. The Golan Heights are still under occupation. In spite of the mounting international calls and efforts to end the Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian and other lands under its occupation, the Israeli regime continues to violate international law. These occupations and acts of aggression should stop immediately.

Before concluding, I would like to react to the reference made this morning to my country by the representative of the Israeli regime. That representative has repeatedly diverted from the main debate in this Chamber — that is to say, the issue of Palestine — and has raised issues that have no relevance to the main debate at hand, obviously in an attempt to deflect attention from the long list of crimes and atrocities it has committed and continues to commit, such as occupation, aggression, militarism, State terrorism — including masterminding the assassination of innocent Iranian nuclear scientists — and crimes against humanity.

Needless to say, my country is a leading nation in rejecting and opposing all kinds of weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. As a State party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Islamic Republic of Iran has on many occasions, including in this Chamber, declared loudly and clearly that nuclear weapons, being inhumane, have no place in our defence strategy. Furthermore, Iran's peaceful nuclear activities are under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); many inspection teams have visited our installations, and another team from the IAEA will visit Iran at the end of this week. Furthermore, Iran has striven within the United Nations framework for the realization of the nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East.

However, what is urgent for the Council to consider and take action on is the unlawful possession of nuclear weapons by the most dangerous and biggest threat to the world — the Israeli regime — which has always remained the main and unique source of destabilization in the Middle East. Given its past history of aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity, including ethnic cleansing, which it has committed over the past decades in the region, it is expected that the Council shall condemn the occupying regime for the possession of nuclear weapons, urge it to abandon such weapons, call on it to accede to the NPT without delay, and demand that it promptly place all its nuclear facilities under IAEA full-scope safeguards. Peace and stability cannot be achieved in the Middle East so long as the massive Israeli nuclear arsenals and war rhetoric deployed by the officials of that regime continue to threaten the region and beyond.

Finally, I also wish to give a short reply to a reference made to my country in the statement of the Ambassador of France, who accused Iran of sending arms to Syria. We are surprised to hear that false and baseless allegation. This allegation is another attempt to whitewash the firm and verified report that France, in line with its hegemonic policies of the past, is arming illegal armed groups in Syria and is responsible for fuelling the conflict, the violations of human rights and the deaths of many civilians in Syria.

The President: I now give the floor to the Representative of Sri Lanka.

Mr. Kohona (Sri Lanka): I join other speakers in commending your delegation, Sir, for convening this important debate. The Sri Lanka delegation associates itself with the statement made by the representative of Egypt on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM).

The United Nations, since its inception, has pursued the lofty goal of bringing about a peaceful settlement to the Palestinian issue. Over the years, despite many laudable efforts, we have witnessed little tangible progress, while the ongoing conflict has had wide ramifications for regional and international peace and security. It is our hope that this year, against the backdrop of the transformation sweeping through the region, will bring a renewal of hope, trust and constructive thinking among the parties that will lead to much needed progress on this issue.

In this context, my delegation is pleased to note that, in recent months, there have been certain developments that bode well for the future. The two sides, since December 2011, have continued their discussions with the Quartet. Hopefully, this will contribute to de-escalating tension. The Israeli Government has resumed the transfer of tax and customs revenues to the Palestinian Authority and has gone ahead with the second phase of prisoner exchanges.

The blockade of the Gaza Strip has been lifted to some extent. The Palestinian security forces have made progress with the security situation in the West Bank, including the seizure of unexploded ordnance. There have been no recent incidents of rockets being fired into Israel. The implementation of United Nations projects in Gaza, especially schools, is proceeding with the construction materials entering through the Kerem Shalom crossing. We hope that these positive developments will continue to enhance confidence-building and to further consolidation of the peace process.

Along with such positive developments, there are also some issues of concern, including incidents of violence in Gaza, the demolition of Palestinian structures in the West Bank and in Jerusalem, Israel's continuing settlement activity in the West Bank and Jerusalem, the ongoing blockade of Gaza and the impact the closure has had on economic activity, and particularly on children in that area, as highlighted by the Department of Political Affairs in its briefing on the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory.

These will not help in building confidence and will take the two parties away from establishing a climate conducive to finding a way forward towards the much-cherished two-State solution. We must not forget the need for Israel to withdraw from the occupied Syrian Golan and southern Lebanon. Its failure to do so will add to the mistrust, tension, frustration and instability in the region. All sides have an obligation to desist from acts that generate uncertainty, suspicion and intolerance.

We appreciate the ongoing efforts by international donors, regional organizations and the United Nations agencies in alleviating the sufferings of innocent civilians, especially children, and in providing protection for them. I would also like to commend the work that has been carried out by the United Nations Agency for Relief and Works for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in assisting millions of Palestinian people in need, especially in the Gaza Strip.

The Member States of the United Nations also have a critical role to play in upholding the relevant international laws and United Nations resolutions. We align with the NAM view that efforts by the high contracting parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention to ensure respect for the Convention in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, would be a vital contribution.

Sri Lanka's position with regard to the inalienable rights of the Palestinian People has been unswerving. We have always supported a peaceful negotiated settlement to the Palestinian issue and have called for the implementation of General Assembly resolutions regarding the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to statehood and the attainment of a two-State solution. We hope that Palestine's application for admission to full membership in the United Nations will receive sympathetic consideration this year.

We remain convinced that the two-State solution is the only sustainable solution for this issue for Israel, Palestine and their neighbours to coexist in peace and harmony. The political unity and economic advancement of the Palestinian people will contribute to the viability of the two-State solution. In that regard, we welcome the holding of the forthcoming Palestinian legislative and presidential elections. The Government and people of Sri Lanka would like to reassure them of our continued support and solidarity.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Iceland.

Ms. Gunnarsdóttir (Iceland): Let me first turn to the situation in Syria. Iceland condemns the widespread human rights violations taking place in Syria. We also condemn the recent terror attacks in the country. The Syrian authorities must put an immediate end to the violence. We urge the Syrian Government to heed the call made by the Secretary-General for a credible, inclusive and legitimate Syrian-led process of comprehensive political change that will address the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people. We also urge the Security Council to do its utmost to prevent the situation in Syria from escalating and to contribute to a solution that will maintain peace and security.

Turning to the question of Palestine, let me at the outset reiterate Iceland's firm support for the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the two-State solution. Developments on the ground, such as the ongoing settlement activities in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem, remain the key obstacle to peace. Settlement activities, which are carried out unilaterally by the occupying Power and in violation of international humanitarian law, continue to create conditions on the ground that are rapidly making the two-State solution unattainable. Time is running out, and the Council has to take that into account in its deliberations.

Living under occupation in and of itself creates a security concern for the Palestinians. Settler violence, including their so-called price tag policy, has increasingly added an extra concern. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the weekly average of settler attacks resulting in Palestinian casualties and property damage increased by 40 per cent in 2011 as compared to 2010, and by over 165 per cent as compared to 2009. At the same time, more than 90 per cent of monitored complaints regarding settler violence filed by Palestinians with the Israeli police in recent years have been closed without indictment. We call on Israel to shoulder its obligation under international humanitarian law and human rights law to prevent attacks against civilians and their property and to ensure that all incidents of settler violence are investigated in an impartial and independent manner.

Iceland welcomed the agreement between Fatah and Hamas last spring on reconciliation, but we await further steps by the two factions. Presidential and parliamentary elections in Palestine are crucial for bringing Palestine forward, and we urge the Palestinian parties to heed the calls of their own people to work towards the realization of an agreement as soon as possible.

Since I last addressed the Council (see S/PV.6636), my country has formally recognized Palestine as an independent and sovereign State within the pre-1967 borders and established full diplomatic relations with it. I would like to recall that Iceland supported Israel when it brought its case to the United Nations and emerged with statehood. In our view, Palestinian demands for self-determination and statehood are equally legitimate. In the middle of a democratic revolution brought on by the fresh breeze of the Arab Spring, we cannot deny Palestine its right to statehood. In fact, it is long overdue.

Iceland reiterates its appeal to the members of the Security Council to seize the historical opportunity they have been given to contribute to the realization of the inalienable right of the Palestinian people for self-determination by recommending to the General Assembly that Palestine be accepted as the 194th State Member of the United Nations. There is no contradiction between Palestine seeking membership of the United Nations and the Quartet-led peace process, which we fully support. United Nations membership would be an affirmation by States Members about our commitment to the two-State solution.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Tunisia.

Mr. Jerandi (Tunisia) (*spoke in Arabic*): First of all, I would like to congratulate you warmly, Mr. President, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for this month. We pay tribute to the wisdom and ability you have demonstrated in conducting the Council's deliberations, enriching its proceedings by organizing open debates on very important issues, including our periodic debate today on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. I should also like to thank Mr. Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs, for his briefing, information and important observations on recent developments in the region.

At a time when our region is experiencing significant changes and as the people of region struggle to regain freedom, dignity and the rights to a decent life and to determine their own fate, and as we hope for a better future that is more equitable, we still see the terrible and painful suffering of the valiant, brotherly Palestinian people, who have fought for decades for the same rights, especially the right to live on their historical territory in an independent and free State. We are also seeing a serious paralysis in the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as the same repressive and provocative practices on the part of Israel, the occupying Power, which flouts the dignity of the Palestinians, deprives them of the most basic rights and jeopardizes their lives, property and living conditions.

The international community admires the changes and the transitions towards democracy and dignity

among the peoples of the region, and was the first to commend them on those preliminary accomplishments. However, the same international community is startlingly silent in the face of Israel's blatant defiance of every international instrument, in particular those pertaining to the obligations of an occupying Power vis-à-vis the people occupied. In that regard, my country's delegation would like to recall some painful facts regarding the situation in occupied Palestinian territory. We would like to share with Member States certain facts that threaten to escalate events in the region and that require courageous positions that would lessen tensions in the region and lead to the achievement of peace.

First of all, the gravity of the process of the Judaization of Jerusalem, and faith in peaceful coexistence among the three monotheistic religions, call for mutual respect among those three religions as the very foundation of peace and security throughout the world. On that we must all agree. The Holy City of Jerusalem is the example par excellence to illustrate that historical reality, which must be protected against any attempt to distort or change it. We are all aware of the significance of that Holy City for Muslims, Christians and Jews, which should impel us to be vigilant with respect to any plans to change the religious, demographic and geographical character of the city, as has been the practice for years under the Israeli occupation, despite repeated calls on the part of the international community to stop such practices.

My country condemns the Judaization of the city of Jerusalem, which seeks to change its character and its image in a colonial and expansionist way, to other ideological ends. We would therefore call upon the international community to ask the occupying Power to respect both the legal and the religious status of that Holy City, a status that was not addressed in resolution 181 (II), of 1947.

Secondly, with regard to the increase in settlement activities, which threaten the establishment of a Palestinian State and peace itself, it is curious that the Government of Israel, which tries to portray itself as serious about returning to the peace process, still acts in a way that contradicts the most basic principles of peace and the rules of international law. We wonder about the allegations by Israel that have enabled settlements and residential units to be built, which increased by 20 per cent in 2011 as compared to their number in 2010, to say nothing about the acceleration in the adoption of legal frameworks to recognize the legality of those settlements. According to a report on the occupied Palestinian territory published in December 2011 by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, that cannot but have an effect on any attempts made to resolve the situation, because the historic territory of Palestine is shrinking on a daily basis due to the practices that I have mentioned, which seek to promote demographic changes and the Israeli presence on Palestinian land and to impose a fait accompli that could affect the future of negotiations on final status issues.

On a number of occasions, the Quartet has asserted that any unilateral action that could be prejudicial to those fundamental issues would be null and void and would have no legal basis. Acts of colonization and the establishment of settlements causes the fragmentation of Palestinian territory — which risks undermining the foundation of a viable, contiguous Palestinian State that could exist side by side with Israel, the occupying Power — since expansionist policies have been clearly condemned under international law, especially the Fourth Geneva Convention and the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. For that reason, putting a stop to those policies would not be considered a sacrifice, but should be done in order to ensure respect for international law. Respect for those principles should be approached without exclusivity and without discrimination among States.

Thirdly, with respect to the legality of Palestine's demand for membership in the United Nations, my country was among the first to support that claim, whose legitimacy is historically, morally and legally grounded. Tunisia believes that, after six decades of struggle, the Palestinian people have the right to have their existence recognized by the international community. In that regard, I would also like to recall the path along which my country embarked last year to combat oppression and authoritarianism. My country fully supports the struggle of the Palestinian people because we are firmly convinced of the legality of their claim, which, moreover, has been recognized by the overwhelming majority of the States Members of the Organization.

In that respect, my country believes that nothing in that claim should be considered a unilateral action, for the measure was put before the United Nations in the context of full respect for the existing rules in that

regard. The Palestinian people therefore have the right to be recognized by the Organization, just as they were at UNESCO.

My country's delegation would also like to praise the Palestinians who are working for national reconciliation. We would like to pay homage to the wisdom of the Palestinian leadership, which is attempting to promote their national interests in order to transcend their differences and to close the gaps that exist among the different Palestinian parties. Along those lines, Tunisia hopes that the Palestinian side will close ranks to tackle their internal differences so as not to give the occupying Power an excuse that would allow it to evade its responsibilities and continue its repressive policies.

My delegation calls for the immediate and complete lifting of the Gaza blockade, which continues to exacerbate the humanitarian suffering of almost 2 million Palestinians, despite Israel's allegation to the contrary. In fact, the suffering due to the closing of more crossing points has increased.

The Arab States presented Israel, the occupying Power, with a peace initiative that they agreed to respect and that reflects their sincere desire to achieve a lasting, just and comprehensive peace that guarantees peace and security in the region and allows its peoples to focus on development and reconstruction. However, the occupying Power continues to adopt the same policies, which consist of evading its responsibilities and commitments, by implementing programmes and projects aimed at transforming the reality on the ground. But no one is any longer taken in by Israel's claims, because Israel does not have the right to trample democracy or to crush the rights of others. Democracy is no longer Israel's monopoly. Democracy is the diametric opposite of occupation.

In conclusion, Tunisia calls for caution in the face of the gravity of the situation and stresses the need to end Israel's policy of colonial oppression when people elsewhere are being liberated from injustice, authoritarianism and persecution. While some welcome these changes, selectively, they ignore a bitter struggle that has been waged by one people for over six decades. We all have an historic responsibility in this regard that should lead us to take firm positions and bolder measures to implement the desired peace.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank you, Sir, for coming to New York to preside over this important meeting of the Security Council. Your interest in this matter is typical of your friendly country, South Africa, which suffered decades of injustice, racial discrimination, repression and persecution by a minority that claimed superiority over your genuine and sterling people merely because it was of European descent.

When Syria courageously defended the struggle of the African National Congress, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela from his apartheid prison cell, some who were entrusted with the maintenance of international peace and security in the Security Council considered him to be a terrorist. I should therefore like to reiterate my thanks to you, Sir, for attending this meeting and for demonstrating your friendly country's considerable interest in the situation in the Middle East.

Since today's topic, "The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question", was first inscribed on the Security Council's agenda, some have sought to make the Council's deliberations on this issue a matter of the mere delivery of speeches serving unrelated political ends. We meet today once again to call on the Security Council to take serious action to end Israel's occupation of Arab lands, inhumane racial policies, and violations of international instruments and norms, and to hold Israel to account for its feverish settlement campaigns and systematic murder of civilians in the occupied Palestinian and Arab territories.

We call on the Council to help the Palestinian people to regain all its legitimate rights, including its right to establish its independent Palestinian State within the borders of 4 June 1967, with its capital in Jerusalem, and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 1948. That is the heart of this agenda item; any other issue injected by other delegations serves merely to distract the Council with manoeuvres and tricks that do not serve but undermine the interests of international peace and security.

We have listened closely to many statements this morning, and were surprised to see some speakers eagerly discover that the topic under discussion was no longer the situation in the Middle East, which, as all know, is directly related to ending Israel's occupation

of Arab territories; preventing Israel, the occupying Power, from undermining the peace process; and drawing international attention to Israel's warmongering in the region, in blatant coordination with some Council members and States of our region. Some speakers have found that the agenda item on the situation in the Middle East has nothing to do with Israel and its occupation of Arab territories, but is in fact related to Syria, while others have come to the illusory conclusion that the matter is related to Iran.

Others still may have come to the conclusion that the item on the Middle East no longer belongs on the Council's agenda because they are under the impression that Israel actually implemented the resolutions of international legitimacy by squelching the question of Palestine and the principles of international law, even though it has not yet withdrawn from the occupied territories in the Golan, southern Lebanon and Palestine; shut down its machinery of repression, settlement activities, assassination and persecution in the occupied Arab territories; or implemented General Assembly resolution 194 (III), which stipulates the return of Palestinian refugees to the cities, villages and homes from which they were evicted in 1948 and 1967. This was the grand discovery made by some speakers this morning.

Despite all international demands and resolutions regarding the termination of Israel's occupation of Arab territories and the establishment of the Palestinian State, unfortunately the Security Council has not risen to its responsibilities under the Charter. No visible progress whatsoever has been made; on the contrary, the situation is deteriorating under Israel's aggressive escalation of its unbridled settlement activities, which in 2011 reached their highest level in 10 years. The construction of settlements increased by 20 per cent in 2011. These disturbing statistics, compiled by the Israeli organization Peace Now, also reflect an increase of some 50 per cent this year in settler aggression against Palestinian civilians and Christian and Islamic holy sites over the previous year. In addition, Israel, the occupying Power, is criminally obsessed with cutting down olive trees.

All of those attacks take place either pursuant to decisions of the Israeli Government or under the direct protection of the Israeli authorities. Recently, Israeli authorities evacuated 90,000 people in the Negev desert from their homes and villages. We state time and again that this adversarial situation presages disastrous consequences for the region and will bring about war at the expense of peace.

It is disconcerting that the Israeli escalation enjoys unqualified financial, military and political backing by some States that are basically responsible for all of the tensions and conflicts in our region since the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Historical, in-depth research has recently shown that the confidential 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between the two colonial Powers, France and the United Kingdom, was designed to prepare for the Balfour Declaration, which came a year later.

Today, those States falsely arrogate to themselves the right to defend human rights — rights that they have nothing to do with — and civilians and claim that they oppose settlement activities and support the establishment of two States. Those States have never taken any action to stem or stop the settlement activities that would lead to the establishment of a Palestinian State and bring peace. Those States have never tried to criticize Israel or apply any serious pressure on that country. Rather, they prevent the Security Council from taking any action on that score.

Similarly, we remind the Security Council here that the United States has prevented the issuance of a press statement condemning the settlements, giving Israel illegitimate immunity for all the crimes it has perpetrated in the occupied Palestinian territory.

In that connection, we would like to note that the League of Arab States has warned of the continued flow of funds from Europe and the United States to radical Israeli organizations that support settlement activity in Palestine and the occupied Syrian Golan. There are so many questions, since none of the States I just mentioned has paid heed to that warning, just as all resolutions, statements and appeals made by the Arab League over long decades — all calling for measures to halt the Israeli massacres and violations in the occupied Arab territories — have been ignored.

Yet those States themselves hastened to receive anything issuing from the League of Arab States with regard to Syria while Syria is absent from the deliberations taking place within the Arab League, even if the position arrived at is not consensual. The purpose of that approach is to use the matter negatively, as a weapon or Trojan horse against Syria, in order to widen the crisis and internationalize the situation in the country in implementation of their

agendas of flagrant interference. This was mentioned in some of the statements delivered of my colleagues this morning — and that despite the fact that a number of members of the League of Arab States reject making the League a device for calling for aggressive external interference after the failure of its mission. Therefore, the credibility of the Arab observers is being targeted and their reports torpedoed, in order to justify future aggression against Syria in all forms — military, diplomatic, political, economic and in the media — regardless of the cost.

Israel, defying international legitimacy, continues to refuse to return the occupied Syrian Golan to Syria and abide by the resolutions of international legitimacy, particularly resolution 497 (1981), which considered the annexation of the Syrian Golan null and void and with no legal effect. Israel continues its settlement activities in the occupied Syrian Golan, as well as acts of terrorism and a policy of apartheid and oppression against Syrian citizens chafing under the yoke of its occupation. It also continues inhuman, coercive detention practices that are contrary to United Nations standards for the treatment of prisoners.

Further, the Israeli occupation authorities' attempts to dismember the occupied Syrian Golan by building a separation apartheid wall east of Majd al-Shams have not been enough for Israel. It continues its aggressive policy in the Golan, tightening the grip on Syrian citizens and the environment, burning land, destroying crops and engaging in the unfair distribution of water by drawing water from Mas'adah Lake in the occupied Golan for the exclusive use of the settlers, which has caused grave and considerable harm to the environment.

We tried to convey to the Secretary-General and the members of the Security Council our official complaints on that point. Regrettably, those complaints were not heeded. Rather, the representatives of the Secretary-General have not referred to those grave Israeli violations in their monthly briefings to the Security Council under the agenda item entitled "The situation in the Middle East". Israel has thus been emboldened to persist in its pursuit of aggressive policies and gross violations, which raises questions about the credibility of the Secretariat's ability to deal objectively with our legitimate issues.

I would like to express here our dissatisfaction with the disregard shown by Mr. Fernandez-Taranco this morning when he failed to mention the terrible situation in the occupied Syrian Golan. That disregard can no longer be glossed over, given that the officials of the Secretariat have had their attention drawn to the situation on dozens of occasions and since they are compelled to include a paragraph on Israeli practices in the Syrian Golan in their briefings. Despite our acceptance of the very few references in previous briefings, what happened today is egregious and makes it clear that the Secretariat must reconsider its position.

In conclusion, I would like to welcome the new members of the Council — Morocco, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Guatemala and Togo — and to wish them every success as they uphold the issues and principles of justice and equity and reject hegemony.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Cuba.

Mr. Núñez Mosquera (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation endorses the statement made this morning by the representative of Egypt on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Unfortunately, since the last time that the Security Council met to discuss these items, exactly three months ago (see S/PV.6636), the situation in the Middle East has not changed in any significant way. Cuba reiterates its support for the application made by the President of the Palestinian Authority for recognition of Palestine as a full State Member of the United Nations.

As we all know, however, powerful interests oppose that application, and it is those same interests that have withdrawn their support for UNESCO for having accepted Palestine into full membership in that organization, as is only just. The rounds of negotiations by the Quartet with representatives of Israel and Palestine separately over the past three months have led to no reduction in provocations or produced any concrete proposals on matters such as the delimitation of borders and security mechanisms in the region, despite the fact that the parties had stated their readiness to assess in a constructive way reciprocal actions that might help to reduce tensions and the Quartet had set a deadline of 26 January for the submission of proposals by the parties.

There must be a resumption of the negotiation process, which was interrupted by Israel's intransigence and its decision to continue to build

settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. Israel, as we all know, continues to vandalize Palestinian assets, including in Jerusalem. The Israeli authorities are identifying areas in East Jerusalem in which to establish national parks, with the clear intention of continuing to hamper the development of Palestinian neighbourhoods and districts.

Violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians and their assets has become systematic. Suffice it to say that the average weekly number of attacks by settlers increased by 40 per cent in 2011 compared to the previous year, and by 165 per cent in comparison to 2009. The abuse and harassment of Palestinian prisoners continues in Israeli prisons.

We reiterate our profound concern regarding the critical humanitarian situation in Gaza, which has been compounded by the ongoing imposition of the total blockade by Israel, preventing access to humanitarian aid, goods and supplies and freedom of movement into and out of the Gaza Strip. That situation must be resolved without further delay.

The Security Council cannot stand by and merely engage in meetings and thematic debates every three months on these matters. It is essential that the Security Council play its proper role in defending international peace and security, and that it adopt concrete, practical measures to ensure that Israel ends its deliberate policies, which flout international law. The Powers that hold the anachronistic veto power must not be allowed to perpetuate their complicity in this state of affairs or to continue to manipulate the Security Council in pursuit of their own private interests, as occurred with the imposition and reinterpretation of resolutions 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011).

Today we are aware that deployment has begun on bases for unmanned drone aircraft, which cause further uncertainty; that natural resources are being exploited to the benefit of outside interests; and that insecurity is increasing in areas of the Middle East that supposedly were to be defended through those resolutions. Cuba reaffirms yet again that all those measures and actions, including illegal construction and expansion of Israeli settlements in the Syrian Golan since 1967, are breaches of international law, international agreements, and of resolutions and the Charter of the United Nations.

It is not by chance that attempts are being made to paint for Syria the same scenario of manipulation and pressure that was embodied in resolutions 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011). That is precisely what is being sought by certain major Powers and their allies so as to bring the Syrian Government into conflict with its brothers in the League of Arab States. The people of Syria have the ability and the wisdom to resolve their issues without outside interference or pressure of any kind.

Cuba reaffirms its position in favour of a just and lasting peace for all peoples of the Middle East that will put an end to the occupation of all territories occupied by Israel since 1967 and guarantee the exercise of all rights, including the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people through the establishment of the independent State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Kazakhstan.

Mrs. Aitimova (Kazakhstan): I thank you, Sir, for convening this very important meeting and for giving me the opportunity to speak.

As I commence my statement, it is my pleasure, on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) group in New York, to extend sincere congratulations to the States that have joined the Security Council as non-permanent members, and to wish them every success.

At the outset, the OIC group would like to welcome the important decision made recently by the Kingdom of Thailand to recognize the State of Palestine on the basis of the 4 June 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The OIC group urges the States that have not yet done so to uphold their responsibilities under the Charter of the United Nations by recognizing the State of Palestine and supporting the efforts being made for Palestine to obtain full membership in the United Nations and to take its rightful place among the community of nations.

Our deliberations today have special significance, given that, most regrettably, they coincide with Israel's continuing illegal actions in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem.

Israel continues to disregard the mounting international calls and efforts to enforce the relevant United Nations resolutions that call for ending the

Israeli military occupation of the Arab lands, its violations of international law and its denial of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people. The OIC Group remains firm in its conviction that the Security Council must act effectively to ensure the full compliance of Israel with its legal obligations and commitments, and end its daily acts of aggression.

Israel is moving forward with its attempts to alter the demographic fabric of occupied East Jerusalem by expelling thousands of Palestinians and replacing them with illegal settlers. That violation is accompanied by a deliberate and conscious effort to construct and expand such unjustifiable settlements and build the "Apartheid Wall" around the occupied city of East Jerusalem.

Similarly, illegalities such as the appropriation and annexation of Palestinian lands, military actions, imposing oppressive security measures, constricting movement and restricting access to religious sites, including Christian and Muslim places of worship, have become a part of the everyday oppression of Palestinians. Even today, Israel is conducting excavations underneath the sacred Al-Aqsa mosque, which aim to completely alter the facts on the ground and isolate occupied East Jerusalem from its natural Palestinian surroundings.

That cycle of oppression and fear represents not only a grave violation by the Israeli authorities and settlers vis-à-vis the unprotected and vulnerable Palestinian civilians, but also a challenge to the international community and the United Nations, which have a special responsibility to strongly call on Israel to end those acts of aggression and respect international law and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Israeli policies and practices in East Jerusalem are particularly alarming given the recent deliberations of the Israeli Knesset on a bill declaring Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the Jewish people. Such deliberations are not only directed against humanity's heritage and history but also challenge international law and international resolutions, which legitimize and affirm the fact that Jerusalem is part of the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel in 1967. The OIC Group therefore has very serious concerns about this issue, which threatens the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people.

Given all those circumstances, the international vision of a two-State solution is diminishing with Israel's persistence in constructing illegal settlements, with all the accompanying consequences.

The construction of the separation Wall is in clear violation of international law and the categorical advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Those illegal and provocative actions on the part of Israel have brought the entire Middle East peace process to a standstill and undermined international peace efforts.

The OIC Group affirms beyond question that an international consensus on realizing a just and comprehensive solution to the Middle East conflict requires the enforcement of international law and international resolutions. There must be full acknowledgement and respect of the commitments and pledges made in that regard, as embodied in the terms of reference of the peace process, namely the relevant United Nations resolutions; the Madrid terms of reference, including the principle of land for peace; the Arab Peace Initiative; and the Quartet road map. Every effort must therefore be made, first of all by the Security Council and the Quartet, to fulfil the collective legal and moral responsibilities for the maintenance of peace and justice in the region. That will be attainable only by compelling Israel to abide by international law and respect the Fourth Geneva Convention.

At this crucial time in history, there has to be an acknowledgement of and full support for Palestinian State-building efforts, which are commendable. Since the peace process, regrettably, remains stagnant, the time has now come to recognize the independent State of Palestine on the basis of the 4 June 1967 borders. This, in fact, is the cornerstone for the attainment of stability, peace and security for Palestine, Israel and other neighbouring countries in the region.

The OIC Group reaffirms that East Jerusalem remains an integral part of the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel since 1967, and that its illegal annexation by Israel has gone unrecognized by the international community. The Group reiterates the centrality of the Palestinian cause for the entire Islamic world; stresses the Palestinian, Arab and Islamic character and profile of occupied East Jerusalem; and strongly reaffirms the need to fully respect the sanctity of the Islamic and Christian cultures.

Finally, the OIC joins the international community in reaffirming that all actions taken, or to

be taken, by Israel to alter the legal, physical and demographic status and institutional structure of the occupied Syrian Golan, as well as to impose jurisdiction and administration there, are to be made null and void and have no legal effect. The OIC demands that Israel abide fully and immediately by Security Council resolution 497 (1981) and withdraw fully from the occupied Syrian Golan to the lines of 4 June 1967, and thus implement Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

In closing, the OIC Group wishes to reaffirm its full support and solidarity with the Palestinian people in their struggle to regain their legitimate and inalienable national rights, including their right of return, to self-determination, and to the establishment of their independent Palestinian State on their national soil, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Mr. Sin Son Ho (Democratic People's Republic of Korea): Mr. President, allow me first of all to express my gratitude to you for the very timely convening of today's open debate of the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. My delegation fully believes that under your able leadership, the current debate will bring about substantial results.

My delegation highly appreciates and fully supports the statement made by His Excellency Ambassador Maged Abdelaziz, Permanent Representative of the Arab Republic of Egypt and Chair of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The Middle East question, which arose with the Israeli occupation of the Arab territories in 1948, continues to be at a stalemate, despite the many United Nations resolutions that have been adopted so far and the various proposals, including the Arab Peace Initiative, brought to the table for negotiation. That is due entirely to Israel's stand against peace and to the prejudicial Middle East policies of some forces. Palestinian land and other Arab territories, including Jerusalem, are still under the Israeli military occupation. The use of force continues to prevail and the construction of settlements continues to increase. That reality is negatively affecting the peace and security process in the Middle East.

My delegation believes that an early solution to the Palestinian problem is the core element of the Middle East question. We must therefore put an end to Israel's military occupation, discrimination and violations of human rights in Palestine at the earliest possible date and allow the Palestinian people to exercise their full rights for national self-determination.

It is also the position of my delegation that mediation in the peace talks between Palestine and Israel should be carried out in line with the principles I have mentioned.

Palestinian membership in the United Nations in particular is vital to the settlement of Middle East question. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea officially recognized Palestine as a State in 1988. Since then, we have extended our unreserved support and solidarity to the efforts of the Palestinian people to establish an independent sovereign State. In that regard, my delegation strongly urges the Security Council to take speedy action with regard to the application for full United Nations membership submitted by Palestine on 23 September 2011. My delegation will continue to extend full support for Palestinian membership in the United Nations.

My delegation takes this opportunity to draw the Council's attention to the violation by an unmanned United States spy plane of Iranian air space on 4 December 2011. The United States drone invasion of Iranian air space constitutes a clear violation of the independence and territorial integrity of a sovereign State. That act contravenes all universally accepted international norms on sovereignty and the inviolability of the airspace of sovereign countries. While strongly denouncing such an act, my delegation demands that the Security Council take appropriate measures to stop such acts against sovereign States.

My delegation also would like to draw the Council's attention to Lebanon and the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. Israel's continued violations of the sovereignty of Lebanon must be addressed and halted immediately, as they are serious breaches of resolution 1701 (2006). My delegation strongly condemns Israel, the occupying Power, for all its attempts to alter the legal, physical and demographic status of the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, and demands that Israel return unconditionally to the borders of 4 June 1967, in

accordance with resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea will continue to stand firmly with the Palestinian and Arab peoples in their struggle for peace, stability and their just cause.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Norway.

Mr. Wetland (Norway): Norway chairs the donor support group for the Palestinian territory. We take the floor today to draw attention to the dangers threatening the foundations of a viable Palestinian State and to point out that the removal of those dangers and obstacles could clear the way for the Palestine State without any further delay.

In recent years, we have witnessed unprecedented progress in the quality and functioning of Palestinian institutions, high levels of growth, improved living conditions and security in the West Bank and the revival of hope for the people. Those positive trends were halted in 2011 and are now being reversed. Now, early in 2012, reduced international financial support and shrinking private-sector investment are increasing the budget deficit and creating an acute liquidity crisis for the Palestinian Authority. Furthermore, the Israeli occupation undermines the potential for growth. In particular, the Israeli restrictions of access for Palestinians hamper economic activity in Area C of the West Bank. Norway is gravely concerned about the continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The settlement activity is illegal under international law and a lethal threat to the two-State solution. The parties have the opportunity to prove their commitments to a two-State solution through concrete actions on the ground. In continuing settlement activities, Israel is doing the opposite. Israel must stop all settlement construction. The deep impasse between the parties cannot endure without undermining the vision of the two-State solution. That is also why the efforts of Jordan to facilitate talks within the framework proposed by the Quartet are so important and must be supported.

The donor support group will reconvene in Brussels on 21 March. The meeting will discuss how we can enhance the sustainability of the Palestinian Authority, how private-sector-led growth can be strengthened in the Palestinian economy and how the situation in Gaza can be improved. The following four points are essential.

First, Palestinian revenues must be increased by a widening of the tax base and improved tax collection. Two thirds of such revenues are collected by Israel and subsequently transferred to the Palestinian Authority each month. There is scope for improving the efficiency, transparency and predictability of that mechanism.

Secondly, Israel must take further steps to ease restrictions on access and movement on development, trade and exports in the West Bank and Gaza. Restrictions, in particular those in Area C, including East Jerusalem, reduce the space in which the Palestinians can sustain their livelihoods. According to the United Nations, today 43 per cent of the West Bank is essentially off-limits for Palestinian use. Palestinians must be able to utilize their natural, productive and land resources in Area C, which are crucial for a viable Palestinian economy.

Thirdly, donors must continue to provide assistance for covering Palestinian recurrent costs for a transitional period in the time ahead. Without such assistance it will be difficult to ensure the long-term viability of the Palestinian Authority and the readiness of the Palestinian institutions for statehood.

Finally, on Gaza, resolution 1860 (2009) calls upon Member States to support international efforts to alleviate the humanitarian and economic situation in Gaza. The resolution also condemns all violence and hostilities directed against civilians and all acts of terrorism. While important progress has been made with regard to the import of goods and the implementation of infrastructure projects, those improvements are not sufficient to provide the economic growth that would realize the full economic and social potential for the population in Gaza. At their next meeting, donors must take further steps to find a solution within the framework of resolution 1860 (2009) that lifts the closure and ensures movement and access through the legitimate crossing points, while also taking security challenges into account.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Kuwait.

Mr. AlMutairi (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): My delegation would like to thank the South African presidency for the convening of this meeting on the

situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question. I should also like to congratulate the new non-permanent members of the Security Council.

We reaffirm and support the statements made on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Arab Group and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

There can be no doubt that a meeting on the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, at this time is very opportune. It reflects the importance that the international community gives to the situation of the Palestinian people in the light of Israel's violations in the occupied Palestinian territories. The peoples and States of the region look to the international community, in particular in the case of the occupied Arab territories, to implement international law and resolutions, since the region continues to be unstable as a result of the disruption of the peace process.

Israeli violations of international law, international humanitarian law and human rights laws, the blockade of Gaza, the collective punishment of the Palestinian people, the refusal to release detainees, the demolition of their properties and assets, the forced deportation taking place and the demographic changes in and judaization of Jerusalem continue. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, more than 1,100 Palestinians are reported to have been displaced as a result of the destruction in East Jerusalem — compared to 606 people displaced in 2010.

The very difficult economic situation, the high level of poverty and unemployment, the illegal settlement activities and reports of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs stating that attacks on civilians in Palestine grew in 2011, with an increase of no less than 50 per cent over the previous year, with the full knowledge of the Israeli authorities — all these factors demonstrate that peace efforts are threatened.

Since 1967, Israel has not ceased constructing new settlements. Some 150 settlements have been built in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. That undermines the rights of Palestinians — the rights to self-determination, equality, freedom of movement — and is contrary to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, the United Nations Charter and international law. That is reflected in resolutions adopted under international law that prohibit annexation and the construction of settlements and provide that they must be dismantled.

Israel's continuation of those unlawful colonial practices in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and its aerial attacks on unarmed civilians demonstrate its disregard for all the agreements made with the Palestinian Authority and for its international obligations. Such actions undermine all efforts to resume the political peace process on the basis of the two-State solution, the 4 June 1967 borders and the road map of the Quartet.

Given Israel's ongoing violations and practices against Palestinians in the occupied territories and its non-compliance with the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, the international community, particularly the Security Council, must send a strong message, without reservations, to the occupying Power that its illegal acts and practices must stop. Otherwise, we will see a further deterioration of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. That will lead to failing efforts to restore mutual trust between the two parties and will jeopardize a political solution on the basis of two States. In addition, we are witnessing the Palestinians trying to establish their State through the support of international organizations and institutions and the United Nations.

Kuwait reiterates that the international community has the legal and moral responsibility to protect Palestinians, whose territory is occupied, and to uphold the United Nations Charter, and Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002), 1515 (2003) and 1860 (2009) in particular. It should implement the Arab Peace Initiative, the road map and the principle of land for peace. Recognition of the Palestinian State would be the greatest investment in peace in the region.

On 22 January 2012, the League of Arab States adopted several resolutions with regard to Syria. The Arab League reiterates the need for Syria to respect the League's plan of action and to implement its provisions in order to reaffirm the aspirations of the Syrian people.

Here, we reiterate the importance of implementing resolution 497 (1981), which states that Israel must withdraw from the occupied Syrian Golan to the 4 June 1967 line. We urge Israel to stop threatening and violating Lebanese sovereignty and to withdraw from all its occupied territories, in

accordance with resolution 1701 (2006), and to respect the water rights and territorial integrity of Lebanon. In this context, we welcome Israeli-Palestinian talks in Jordan. Nevertheless, we reiterate that the Quartet should give priority to putting an end to the Israeli settlement policy. Otherwise, the peace process will fail; it will not succeed in achieving a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Qatar.

Mr. Al-Thani (Qatar) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like to congratulate you, Sir, on your country's presidency of the Security Council and on your efforts so far to successfully manage the Council's busy programme of work this month. I also thank you for convening this open meeting. I wish to thank Mr. Fernandez-Taranco for his briefing this morning.

When the Quartet proposed a timetable for the activation of direct negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli parties in its statement last September (see SG/2178), with a view to reaching an agreement that included key issues before the end of 2012, we supported that proposal and hoped for its success in achieving the goal desired by everyone, although the past positions of the Israeli side were not encouraging. On previous occasions we emphasized that the work of the Quartet should not be limited to setting dates and timetables, but should ensure the appropriate conditions for their implementation.

However, as expected, the Government of Israel did not remove the main obstacle to the success of the negotiations, which is illegal settlement activity. Although it recently held meetings with the Palestinian side in Amman, those meetings are not enough to break the vicious circle experienced by the Palestinian cause as long as the Israeli Government has no real intention to make peace. That Government continues to ignore all international calls urging it to halt and dismantle its settlements in the territories occupied since 1967. Those settlements are illegal and constitute a real threat to the peace negotiations and the two-State solution and are a blatant violation of international law. A few days ago, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos briefed the Council on the grave humanitarian impact of the presence of illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

When one thinks about the fact that Israel has already exceeded all limits, the Government of Prime Minister Netanyahu surprises us with unprecedented transgressions. A few days ago, by proposing the construction of new housing units in the West Bank, the Israeli Government attempted to legitimize not homes currently inhabited by settlers in the settlement of Migron, but settlements that even Israel itself considers illegal. In that regard, it is necessary that the States that sponsored the Quartet's proposal and that believe in a negotiated solution act to bring the required political pressure to bear for the success of this endeavour.

In that context, some have suggested that the Palestinian side has not been acting in a manner conducive to the implementation of those steps. The Palestinian attempt for recognition of the State of Palestine as an independent State does not undermine the two-State solution at all. That is why we will not shy away from calling on the Council to support it. In so doing, we call on the Council to shoulder its responsibility towards the Israeli actions that undermine the two-State solution by imposing a fait accompli situation that makes it impossible to build a viable Palestinian State in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, including East Jerusalem.

It goes without saying that the solution to the crisis in the Middle East depends upon Israel's withdrawal from all occupied Palestinian land, the remaining Lebanese territory and the Syrian Golan, as well as on abiding by the resolutions of the United Nations.

What is of concern to us in particular is the escalation of the illegal measures taken by the Israeli authorities aimed at the Judaization of occupied Jerusalem. In that regard, we would like to stress our firm opposition to such measures by Israel and its attempts to change the Arab identity of the city, its demographic composition, its legal status and its religious character. We stress also that these attempts are null and void and have no legal effect.

We urge the international community to express its rejection of the attempts by Israel to damage Islamic and Christian holy sites, demolish homes and expel the Arab population, including cancelling their identity cards. Such attempts violate the obligations of Israel, the occupying Power, as well as international law, are contrary to the relevant United Nations resolutions and

undermine the foundations of a peaceful solution to the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Syrian issue is no less urgent, in terms of the high and unfortunate number of victims of violence in Syria, as stated in the briefing of the Assistant Secretary-General, or in terms of the nature of the situation in the country, with its complex composition and regional dimensions, and in terms of the risk of seeing the country slide towards a greater level of violence.

We, like other countries, are concerned about the continuing serious crisis in a brotherly Arab country. We are keen to stop the bloodshed that has befallen the Syrian people. We have demanded an end to violence, murder, violations of fundamental freedoms and bloodshed. We also urge the Syrian Government to discharge its responsibility. At the same time, we stress the need to protect the cohesion and unity of the Syrian people and Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The Arab League has spared no effort in playing a positive role in order to resolve the Syrian crisis in a regional framework through the Arab League initiative, devoid of any violence or military intervention. That initiative included the deployment of a mission of observers to Syria to monitor its implementation. On Sunday, after the Arab ministerial committee in charge of the Syrian crisis reviewed a report of the Arab observers in Syria and made its recommendations to the meeting of the Arab Foreign Ministers, the ministerial committee developed an Arab League action plan for an Arab solution to the Syrian crisis, similar to the solution proposed for the crisis in Yemen.

The Arab League asked the President of the ministerial committee and the Secretary-General to inform the Security Council and to ask for its support for the plan. While we commend the request made by the Secretary-General to the Council to shoulder its responsibilities, we specifically believe that the Arab League's request to the Council to adopt its plan, in accordance with the resolutions of the Arab League, was in line with the demands of the Secretary-General and the international community. We stress the importance of supporting the efforts of the Arab League as part of energizing regional solutions in accordance with Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Al-Mouallimi (Saudi Arabia) (*spoke in Arabic*): I am pleased to congratulate you, Mr. President, on South Africa's assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for this month. I am confident that your leadership of the work of the Council will lead to success in its deliberations. By the same token, I would like to express our appreciation and respect for the outgoing non-permanent members, as well as to congratulate the friendly and brotherly new States members of the Council, namely, Morocco, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Togo and Guatemala. By the same token, I would like to thank Mr. Fernandez-Taranco for presenting his briefing on the situation in the Middle East.

I should like to express my country's support for the statements made on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the League of Arab States.

This debate comes at a time of critical economic and political circumstances, the most salient features of which are the following.

First, Israel, the occupying Power, still practises in the occupied Palestinian territory a policy that aims at increasing settlements, which reached a record level in 2011. Further expropriation of Palestinian land, particularly in Al-Quds Al-Sharif, has thwarted the aspirations of the Palestinian people for freedom and independence in accordance with relevant international resolutions.

Secondly, it seems that Israel is turning a blind eye to the renewed situation in the Middle East. While it views the aspirations of the peoples of the region for freedom with disrespect and arrogance, it also thinks that it can deny the Palestinian people their legitimate rights to self-determination and the establishment of their independent State on their national soil, within the borders of 4 June 1967 and with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital.

Thirdly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has the honour of being the Custodian of the two Holy Sites, views with considerable concern the Israeli practices in Al-Quds Al-Sharif that are designed to efface its Arab and Islamic identity and to undermine the rights of the Christians and Muslims in the Holy City. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia calls upon the international community to shoulder its responsibilities vis-à-vis Israeli actions in Al-Quds Al-Sharif, including settlement activities, the confiscation of Palestinian

land and homes, the eviction of Palestinians and endangering the Holy Shrine.

Fourthly, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia calls upon the international community to take a courageous and decisive position by fully recognizing the Palestinian State, within the borders of 4 June 1967 and with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, by responding positively to the application transmitted to the Security Council for Palestine's membership in the United Nations. It should also call upon Israel to end the occupation, lift the blockade of Gaza, dismantle settlements and release Palestinian detainees. Any procrastination will constitute an abandonment of the moral responsibility that must be shouldered by the international community and the Security Council.

My country presented a comprehensive Peace Initiative to the international community to end all aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including an end to Israeli occupation of the Syrian Arab Golan and the remaining Lebanese territory and the establishment of the State of Palestine. That Initiative has been endorsed by all Arab States. It is a source of pain that Israel continues to disregard that initiative, as if it believes that it can be kept on the table forever. Israel's settlement policy uproots the two-State concept and therefore undermines the bases and principles around which the Arab Initiative revolves.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is deeply pained by the suffering of the brotherly Syrian people. We call on the Syrian authorities to cease repelling the legitimate aspirations of their citizens with violence and bullets. We hope that the Syrian Government will heed the voice of reason and wisdom and abide by the proposals of the Arab League to find a balanced political solution that achieves the aspirations of the Syrian people, preserves the unity and territorial integrity of Syria, halts the cycle of violence, and spares the country from foreign interference in its internal affairs.

My country decided to withdraw its observers from the Arab observer mission to Syria because we did not feel that the Syrian authorities were serious in responding to the Arab initiative. We want to be more than mere witnesses and supporters of the killing and persecution of the great Syrian people. It is high time for the international community to shoulder its responsibilities towards Syria. The Security Council should hasten to take the necessary decisions in support of the Arab initiative, and to adopt the political, economic and security measures that are designed to implement all its aspects.

My country views with concern Iran's threats to the security of the Arabian Gulf and the safety of its waterways. We call on Iran to refrain from any actions that threaten the security of the region. In that regard, we hope that Iran will swiftly respond to the appeals of the international community with respect to its nuclear programme and the need to subject it to international supervision in order to ensure that it does not go beyond the peaceful uses of energy. At the same time, we call for making the entire Middle East, without exception, an area free of nuclear and all other weapons of mass destruction. The new Middle East needs more prosperity, not more nuclear weapons; more reconstruction, not more settlements; more freedoms, not more killings; more justice, and not more injustice, persecution and despotism. Those are the hopes of the Middle East and the aspirations of its peoples. Those are the Council's responsibilities and duties.

The President: I give the floor to the representative of Libya.

Mr. Shalgham (Libya): First of all, on behalf of the Arab Group, I would like to express our great thanks for the convening of this debate on the Middle East. Also on behalf of the Arab Group, which it is my honour to chair this month, I would like to warmly thank all members of the Council for their ongoing interest in events in the Middle East, and in particular the cause of the Palestinian people and the Israeli occupation of their territory.

The suffering of the Palestinian people under the yoke of the Israeli occupation requires no further explanation or discussion. The international media continually transmit images, sounds, figures and facts that bear witness to the actions of the Israeli occupying army and settlers in their repression of unarmed Palestinian citizens. They confiscate land, disperse families, establish settlements and commit acts of physical violence against Palestinian citizens.

I will not go on at length about the number of Israeli settlements and settlers in the West Bank or about the rise in violence committed by Israeli settlers against Palestinians, because a few days ago, before this body, Ms. Valerie Amos, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, took the floor to

describe very forcefully Israeli practices in the West Bank. Those facts and figures are undeniable proof that Israel does not want peace and that all its proposals on negotiations are simply stalling tactics intended to allow them to annex Palestinian lands and to swallow them up fully. Israel's expansionist policies are systematic. Their aim is to Judaize the Palestinian territories, and we all know that.

The Council does not see what is happening on the ground. The Council does not see settlers taking over Palestinian land or restrictions being imposed upon Palestinian citizens, including Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, and the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council. But the question we must ask is whether the Council does not see, does not want to see, or does not want to do anything. Does anyone in this Council approve of the practices of the occupying Power, which contravene all international covenants and instruments? The prevailing suspicious silence could even be construed as approval of the crimes that Israel is committing in full view of the world. The Council needs to assume its responsibilities and to take strict practical measures to put an end to these crimes.

The Arab world is experiencing a historic revolution that marks a decisive turning point in the life of our peoples. It is a revolution of freedom, democracy and progress against tyranny and authoritarianism. This revolution will restore to the Arabs, who seized their liberty as free people, the right and the power to make decisions. Now we are able to usher in true and bold peace. Despots are incompetent; they are not capable of building peace. Despots yield only to occupation. They close their eyes to reality and attack their own people, but the revolution of liberty embodies in the Arab Spring is democratic and will pave the way and open the door to liberation. It will allow us to embark on a path of peace.

Israel, its people and its Government must realize that free Arabs, who have put an end to oppression and overthrown despots, are not going to accept that their brothers in Palestine should continue to suffer the pangs of oppression, persecution and despotism under the yoke of Israeli occupation. Israel must therefore adopt a peace policy. It must reject the annexation of Palestinian territory and the establishment of settlements; it must give up the Judaization of Jerusalem and racist extremism, because those will not bring us peace; they will only incite to further hostility and confrontation and lead to political and military escalation, which would be very prejudicial to world peace and the global economy.

Humankind seeks to overcome its economic obstacles to achieve greater cooperation and prosperity, and people today have made enormous progress in science and communications. Humankind realizes the dangers of confrontation, wars and destruction. Humankind is capable of dealing with problems through dialogue and compromise because there is no victory in war. Profiteers may try to attain greater benefits, but in the Arab Spring of liberty people want peace, freedoms and progress. They believe in coexistence on the basis of justice, respect for human rights and the rejection of oppression, occupation and authoritarianism. We are prepared to work with the Security Council to bring about the goals of the United Nations for the sake of the maintenance of international peace and security.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Bolivarian Republic of Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

Mr. Valero Briceño (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) (*spoke in Spanish*): We would like to commend you, Mr. President, and your country, South Africa, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council this month. We also welcome the new members of the Council.

Since 1947, the Security Council has adopted many resolutions on the situation in the Middle East and the question of Palestine. Without exception, not one of them has met with compliance from the Government of Israel. Speakers in today's meeting have primarily focused on addressing Israel's repeated non-compliance with those resolutions and its impunity for crimes committed against the Palestinian people, which are, today, the main obstacles to the peace so ardently desired in the Middle East. The Council has a duty to reject the continued non-compliance of Israel with the resolutions on peace and security in the Middle East. The United Nations Charter bestows upon the Council the powers to do so and to establish whether or not that State is willing to meet its obligations set out in the Charter.

So long as the efforts of the Security Council are delayed or blocked — in an atmosphere that is strained owing to the existence of double standards — the United Nations will continue to face a paradox,

namely, continuing to include among its members a State that disrespects — ad infinitum and flagrantly — the founding principles of the United Nations and of international justice, while, at the same time, denying recognition to the State of Palestine, which has fully complied with all of the requirements for admission and which has already been recognized by the vast majority of States Member States of the Organization.

We must ensure that decisive progress is made towards achieving a peaceful and just solution for the question of Palestine. It is a sine qua non condition that the suffering of the Palestinian people be ended and that the ethnic cleansing, aimed at attempting to expunge that people from its ancestral lands, be averted. That is why we support the Non-Aligned Movement's call to hold without delay a conference of the high contracting parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention in order to guarantee respect for the Convention in the occupied Palestinian territories, including in East Jerusalem.

We condemn the actions of the Israeli Government aimed at preventing the establishment of a Palestinian unity Government and, in particular, the holding without charges of Mr. Aziz Al-Dweik, the leader of the Palestinian Legislative Council. We call upon Israel to free him immediately, as well as the increasing number of Palestinian political prisoners being held in Israeli prisons.

Stability in Syria is fundamental for peace in the Middle East. We welcome the endeavours of the Government of President Bashar Al-Assad to preserve the unity, integrity and stability in his country and to find a peaceful, political and inclusive solution. In that context, we condemn all terrorist and antidemocratic acts aimed at hampering the programme of reforms, which, under the auspices of the Syrian Government and with the majority support of the people, is moving forward in that Arab country. The aspirations of this age-old and honourable people must be channelled through political dialogue and peaceful means. We deplore the manipulation of the legitimate demands of the people, which has created chaos and sown terror in order to impose a regime designed to satisfy the interests of imperialism and Zionism.

The double standards of certain Powers disqualify them entirely from being able in any way to pass judgment on the situation in Syria. We firmly condemn those who promote interventionist sanctions and endeavour to repeat the military and political aberration that was committed against Libya. The agenda of dialogue and peace must prevail, and not the warmongering and interventionist agenda that the imperial Powers wish to impose at any price. We therefore welcome the calls made by many countries, including members of the Security Council, for a peaceful, constitutional and inclusive solution to the issue of Syria.

It is heart-rending when any lives are lost anywhere on Earth. We are talking about avoiding human sorrow. Political, cultural or religious differences must be overcome by means of dialogue and understanding.

Those who promote interventionist unilateral action against the Government and people in Syria are violating international law and flouting the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter.

The valuable information submitted to the Security Council by the representative of the Syrian Government must be taken constructively. The many measures adopted by the sovereign Syrian Government and its readiness to take into account the positive recommendations of the Arab League are a demonstration of a spirit of dialogue and political will that guides the authorities of that country. We stress that respect for the sovereignty of States, non-interference and the peaceful settlement of disputes are fundamental principles of international law and essential conditions for the maintenance of international peace and security.

The Israeli Government is taking advantage of current conditions in the Middle East to perpetuate its occupation of the Syrian Golan and continue its outrages against the Palestinian people. We therefore reiterate our support for the implementation of resolution 497 (1981) of 17 December 1981. We recall that that resolution reaffirms that the acquisition of territory by force is inadmissible and declares that the Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdiction and administration in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights is null and void and without international legal effect.

We renew the call for the State of Israel to respect the sovereignty of the Lebanon and to avoid further conflicts, such as that which took place in July 2006. Only through direct negotiations between the parties, as set out in resolution 1701 (2006), can constructive solutions be reached.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Benin.

Mr. Zinsou (Benin): At the outset, allow me, Sir, on behalf of the African Group, to congratulate South Africa on its assumption of the Security Council presidency and on its wise leadership of the Council. Allow me to also acknowledge the presence of South Africa's Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, who is presiding over this important meeting today. The African Group would also like to express its appreciation to the Russian Federation for its proficient stewardship of the Council during the month of December. The African Group furthermore expresses its warm congratulations to the new Security Council members and conveys its appreciation to the members whose terms ended in December.

The African Group remains deeply concerned by the grave situation prevailing in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, as a result of the continuation and escalation of illegal Israeli policies and practices. Israel's unlawful actions and illegal practices have contributed to the worsening of the humanitarian situation and to economic deterioration in the occupied Palestinian territory. In this connection, the African Group calls for an end to all of those illegal practices and policies, and for the immediate and complete lifting of the illegal blockade imposed by Israel on the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

The African Group is especially concerned by the continued construction and expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including in East Jerusalem. The African Group reiterates that all Israeli settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, constitute grave breaches of international law and a grave danger to the viability of the internationally agreed two-State solution of Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security.

The African Group calls on the international community, including the Security Council, to act in unison to compel Israel to cease forthwith its construction and expansion of settlements and to abide by its obligations under international law and relevant United Nations resolutions. That is imperative for salvaging the prospects for realizing the two-State solution based on the pre-1967 borders.

The African Group regrets the lack of progress in the peace process and calls for the resumption of peace talks between the Palestinians and Israelis. It reaffirms its support for a peaceful solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of the principles of international law and all relevant United Nations resolutions, with an emphasis on the establishment of an independent Palestinian State within the borders of 4 June 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

It is high time for the international community to act decisively, guided by the rules and principles of international law and justice, in order to finally bring an end to the Israeli occupation. It is high time to enable the Palestinian people to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and freedom. It is high time to resolve all other final status issues in accordance with international law and United Nations resolutions.

(*spoke in French*)

Having made that group statement, I would like to make some remarks and comments in my national capacity. At the outset, I wish to say that recent history teaches us that the greatest threats to international peace and security come from peoples who have long been frustrated. The Palestinian question makes of the Arab community a frustrated community. Benin believes firmly that the United Nations, with the dynamism that characterizes it today — and which Benin greatly appreciates — has the resources to find a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian question, and that it should not shirk its historic responsibility to do so.

Benin has always supported and continues to support a free and independent Palestinian State living in peaceful coexistence with Israel. Benin lends its unflagging support to the two-State solution and calls on the Security Council to facilitate the prompt execution of that solution in order to offer the Palestinian people relief from the compound sufferings that mark their daily lives.

We believe in the virtues of mediation and of choosing that option as the means to resolve disputes in today's world. We therefore urge the Quartet to step up its efforts to quickly restore dialogue between the two parties in order to find a lasting solution to this situation, which has gone on far too long.

A settlement to the Palestinian situation should go hand in hand with the settlement of all the pending issues in the Middle East, including the establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free zone, respect for human rights and the promotion of gender equality in all countries of the region, respecting the fundamental principles and values contained in the United Nations Charter.

Mr. Alrowaiei (Bahrain) (*spoke in Arabic*): I thank you, Sir, for convening this open debate on an issue that has preoccupied the Organization for over six decades and will endure until the Palestinian people recover their full rights, including the right to establish their own State, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Allow me also to welcome Azerbaijan, Guatemala, Morocco, Pakistan and Togo to membership in the Security Council.

Some weeks ago, we celebrated the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. On that occasion, as on previous ones, it was clear that the question of Palestine lies at the core of the crisis in the Middle East and that the Israeli settlement policy is the major obstacle to peace. If the peace process is now at a stalemate, one of the most serious and principal causes of the paralysis is Israel's insistence on pursuing its policy of colonial annexation, to the frustration of the Palestinian side as expressed in the activities of the Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. Israel's refusal to implement United Nations resolutions, the Madrid terms of reference, the road map, and other resolutions of international legitimacy is a flagrant violation of the rules of international law, which will inevitably lead to further confrontation, tension and strife throughout the region.

The Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council, at its thirty-second session in December last year, took up developments surrounding the question of Palestine. It stressed that a lasting, just and comprehensive peace can be achieved only through the creation of an independent Palestinian State within the borders of June 4 1967, with East Jerusalem as its capital; that East Jerusalem is a red line; and that its support for Palestine's application to United Nations membership is legitimate, just and a further encouragement to the peace process.

The Security Council has another historic opportunity today to resolve the question of Palestine through the two-State solution by accepting the membership of the State of Palestine within the June 4 1967 borders. It is clear that the UNESCO decision to accept Palestine as a full-fledged member was an important milestone on the road to creating an independent Palestinian State on Palestinian land.

I would like to reiterate the position clearly expressed by His Majesty King of Bahrain in his statement before the General Assembly on 22 September 2011 (see A/66/PV.15). His Majesty called on the international community to take this opportunity to give help our brothers, the Palestinian people, to realize their legitimate aspirations by recognizing their State on their own land inside the June 4 1967 borders. He called on the international community to put an end to the conflict by ensuring full Israeli withdrawal from all occupied Arab land to the June 4 1967 lines, including from the occupied Syrian Golan and lands occupied in southern Lebanon, in accordance with relevant international resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative. That is a firm position of Bahrain on the situation in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the Kingdom of Bahrain again appeals to the Security Council to intensify its efforts towards a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East, based on relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council; to put an end to the Israeli occupation that has endured since 1967; and to establish a sovereign, viable, contiguous Palestinian State living side by side in peace with the State of Israel.

The President: There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. The Security Council has thus concluded this stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The meeting rose at 6.30 p.m.